Remigration of Indian subalterns in the colonial Indian Ocean

Remigration of Indian Subalterns in the Colonial Indian Ocean*

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> I beg to say that about 2 and a half years ago I came with my wife (Sinnapona) and two children (Casu - 12 years old boy and Perumal sami - 11 months old boy) from my country in India to Madras in order to came to Malaya through Immigration Recruit. When we came to Madras there was no Immigration Recruit, and we were about to go back to our country. In Madras one Kanniyappa Meistry met us and said that he would take us to Burmah and employ us and pay wages of one Rupee to each per day. We believed his words and followed him to Burmah. He took us to a place called Mayetwa in Burmah and employed us to work as coolies in a rice godown owned by Mohideen Bahadur, Bags Dept, Galrk, Mayetwa (Burma). I was disappointed to a great extent, and I have seen the Kangany cheated me. So I left my wife and children there, and myself came to Teluk Anson and employed as a tapper.[1]

The account of Sittu Reddiyar, who migrated in 1937 from his home village to Madras, from Madras to Burma, and then to Malaya to work as a rubber tapper in lower Perak is not untypical of subaltern Indian migrant workers in the colonial era. Even after the official suspension of indentured overseas migration in 1917, 'free' migrants still travelled overseas and could be cheated by the kanganis, sardars, or maistries (labour intermediaries) who recruited them. The question remains: why did such a large number of Indian labour migrants who had completed one term of service overseas, return to India, and then remigrate, or move from one colonial territory to another? The reasons were diverse and included the difficulties of re-integration in India, returnee recruiting, family regroupment activities, better employment opportunities, and economic recession or discrimination in the colony where they first arrived. At the same time, the frequency of remigration, and of onward migration to other colonies, suggests considerable enterprise and strategic thinking on the part of labour migrants seeking out opportunities within the interstices and constraints of the colonial labour economy. This paper discusses the debates surrounding remigration and presents a thematic reinterpretation drawing upon case studies from Indian Ocean archives.

Remigration Debates

Remigration has been discussed and debated in various forms. During the nineteenth century, colonial officials used the term to designate second wave or returnee migrants, either returning to the same destination or simply indenturing for a second time to another colony. The cases cited involved a return to India prior to remigration. Subsequent studies have also tracked remigration of Indian subalterns between destinations, for example from one Caribbean island to another, or between Indian Ocean colonies such as Reunion, Mauritius and the Cape. Trans-

continental remigration has been a more recent focus of analysis. In all cases, the causal factors for these journeys and resettlements remain contested and require further study.

The question of Indian migrants returning to the same destination was widely remarked upon by colonial officials and employers soon after the onset of government regulated indenture to Mauritius and the Caribbean in the 1840s and recognised to be both an asset and a danger. Returnee migrants acted as recipients of information about estates and planters which could favour some and disadvantage others.[2] British Guiana employers were reportedly reluctant to 'take on re-indentured Indians since these knew the ropes.'[3] The constant stream of subaltern migrants returning to the colonies where they had served and in some cases migrating to new destinations posed an obvious challenge to the perception of indenture as a type of 'forced labour' or slavery under a new guise: 'These migratory dynamics make the indenture system more complex and, above all, pose some serious challenges to the existing scholarship' on indenture, wrote Lomarsh Roopnarine in 2009, who estimated that around 50,000 Indians were remigrants to all colonies.[4] He offers some intriguing suggestions as to causal factors, opining that 'Indians remigrated because they considered the Caribbean, despite its authoritarian structures, to be materially and economically superior to their homeland.' Higher wages were a factor mentioned by remigrants interviewed, whilst others frankly stated that their return to India had never been intended as more than a temporary sojourn to revisit family. The circulation of remigrants leads Roopnarine to acknowledge that 'Indians were not totally locked in the plantation system' and to ask 'does this movement constitute another side of the indentured Indians' experience?'[5] He acknowledges some merit in the explanation of nineteenth century British colonial officials like Surgeon-Major D.W.D. Comins that migrant Indians having experienced life away from inflexible village social structures, felt that 'their best interests and advantages' lay in the colonies, rather than the motherland. [6] Roopnarine explicitly contends that social egalitarianism was a new and positive experience for subaltern Indian migrants whilst also acknowledging that the very nature of the plantation system placed some restrictions on the exercise of this new found freedom: 'every indentured laborer entered the Caribbean on an equal footing regardless of religion, caste, or gender, something most indentured laborers had never before experienced. This equality was undermined on the plantations but also allowed the low-caste Indians to improve their status through indentured service.'[7] While we may question the premise of gender equality, social stratification certainly took time to be re-implanted in the overseas context. Also of interest is Roopnarine's contention that planters did not always welcome returnees with open arms, and that the remigration took place 'in spite of the planters' conservative policy of limited acceptance'.[8] This stands in contrast to the very deliberate use of time-expired indentured labourers as recruiters in Mauritius and elsewhere. This was partly in response to the constant criticism that indentured labour resembled slavery, and partly because they proved much more effective in transmitting information and reducing the number of complaints about recruitment. This prominence of returnee recruiters, with or without official approval, indicated a measure of autonomy in the otherwise highly regulated system of indentured recruitment and transport.[9]

In 2011, Michael Mann sought to set a new agenda for research on Indian migration by focussing on the circulation of South Asian 'kulis' as he termed them.[10] He pointed out that 'indentured labourers ... often migrated multiple times for short periods', resulting in 'a constantly circulating regime of migration based on village and familial units' which necessitated, he argued, a focus not on a particular destination but rather on the 'social and economic transformations within the region of migrant origin.' This begs the question of what he considers short-term indentured migration since, although there was plentiful short-term migration within India (including to Assam), the evidence for annual or seasonal remigration to and from the indenture colonies is lacking, except in the case of returnee recruiters. Cheng Siok-Hwa and others have provide statistical evidence for the transient nature of Indian migration to Burma (Myanmar) and Malaya, although it was said that that the typical worker stayed for at least three to five years.[11] Patrick Peebles, however, hotly contests the idea that seasonality was an important feature of Indian migration to the plantations of Sri Lanka, an idea which he describes as a figment of colonial epistemology and anti-Tamil prejudice rather than based upon evidence drawn from the lives of migrants themselves.[12] More recent research has focussed on the development of the concepts of space and agency in the indenture diaspora. Hurgobin and Basu have argued that indentured workers developed complex information networks stretching from their places of origin in India to the different nodes of colonial plantation societies, while Durgahee has demonstrated the importance of space in ensuring a better representation of the realities of Indian indenture.[13] Temporality in indenture equally needs to be addressed, as indentured and time-expired labourers exhibited varying degrees of agency. The remaining sections of this paper investigate and assess the validity of the interpretations outlined here, through case studies of subaltern migrants from India in the Indian Ocean region, and offer an analytical tool for grouping remigrants according to a proposed thematic classification.

Distress Remigrants

A significant proportion of remigrants can be defined as persons who were unable or unwilling to reintegrate into Indian society for various reasons, and who re-indentured or re-embarked as a result of 'distress.' Marriages contracted overseas were sometimes abandoned by returnees, often because they were inter-caste unions, or because returning migrants discovered new opportunities for more advantageous remarriages. Such a situation confronted Gungoo, no. 97,355 who returned with her husband Soobroydoo, formerly a *peon* (a low ranking worker) in the Immigration Department to South India, accompanied by their daughter. Shortly after their arrival in Madras, according to Gungoo, her husband 'abandoned her and married another girl.' After remaining three months at Madras, she was compelled, she said, to sell all her jewellery and to pay for her passage back to Mauritius.[14]

Should they wish to return, in numerous cases migrants reported difficulties of 'getting back into caste' and other social impediments to reintegration into the village societies they had left (the very prejudices that caused some of them to migrate in the first instance). Several remigrants informed George Grierson, who was conducting an enquiry into colonial emigration in the early 1880s, that they had been abused 'for leaving their fatherland'. Others complained

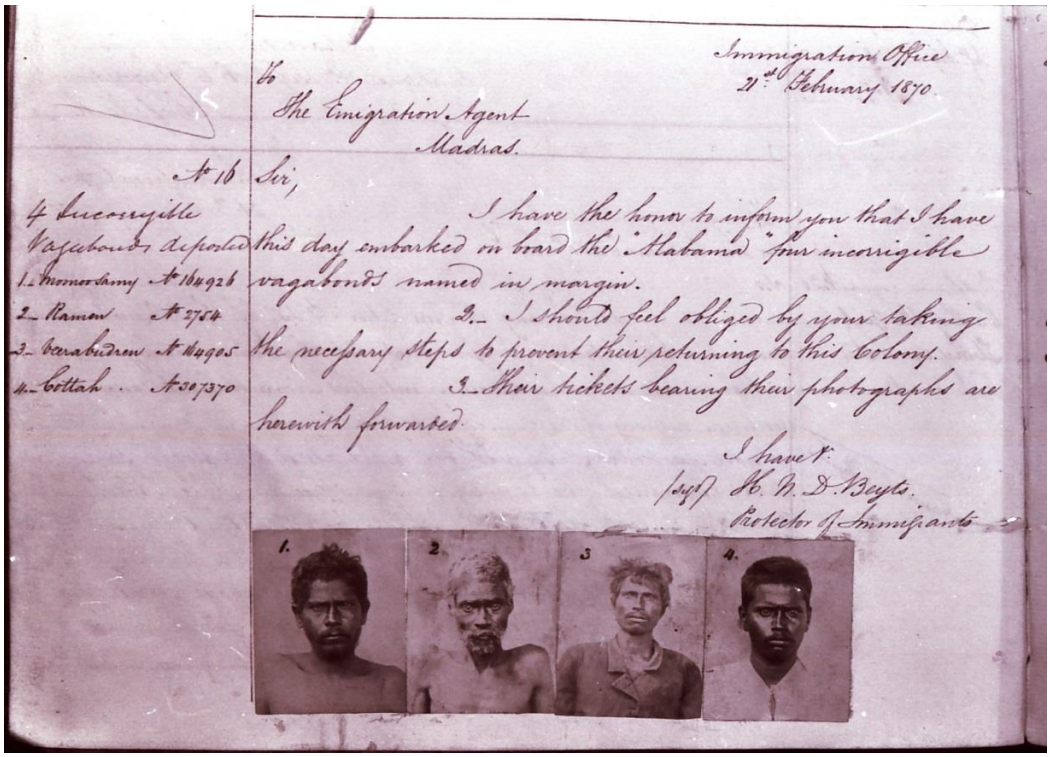
of the substantial amounts of money they had to spend to get back into caste. It was also not uncommon for time-expired indentured labourers returning home with savings, to be targeted by thieves and fraudsters who robbed them of their hard-earned cash within a short time of their disembarkation.[15] This key factor behind rapid remigration was discussed in the Protector's Report on the ship *Sir Robert Seppings* which arrived in Mauritius from Calcutta on 12 March 1849. The Protector of Immigrants interviewed the new arrivals soon after disembarkation and recounted that among them was a remigrant who had been gone only five months. Questioned about his early return, he explained that he had taken home a substantial sum in savings of Rs 300 (equivalent to six years' wages) but had been drugged and robbed of all his money the day after his arrival.[16] The following month, the Protector's Report on the ship *Champion* which arrived on 4th April 1849 yielded three further cases. Two men reported that they had been robbed in Calcutta, where they had remained for a few weeks after returning from Mauritius. A third man, described as of the Rajput caste, explained that Rs 400 had been stolen from him at Gaya, causing him to turn back towards Calcutta immediately and re-embark for Mauritius. Towards the end of the same month, with the arrival of the *Princess Royal* from Calcutta, the Protector reported two further cases. One remigrant complained that he had been robbed of Rs 400 three days after his arrival while still in Calcutta, another man had been cheated out of a similar sum in his home village.[17] It is evident that the signposted arrival of returning labour migrants carrying considerable sums in cash attracted much unwanted attention at major ports of disembarkation. Additionally, those whose relationships had broken down, or who experienced hostility from former neighbours and family, or who had spent their savings and were unable to gain employment locally, were a constant presence among remigrants although no official statistics exist to enable us to measure accurately the impact of economic adversity and social breakdown.

Criminalised Remigrants

Indentured migrants were wanted for their labour and while children and elderly parents were permitted to embark as part of family groups, recruits were predominantly youthful, aged between 15 and 45. Those unable or unwilling to work were a drain on colonial resources and to reduce the expenditure on unproductive migrants, strict vagrancy laws, imported from Europe, were applied to the new arrivals in the sugar colonies. The Mauritian immigration department introduced a category of Indian immigrant termed 'incorrigible vagabonds' – persistent offenders who had become unable or who refused to work, or individuals whose activities were considered dangerous to the host or labouring population. These incorrigibles were deported back to India on a regular basis, in the hope that they might find refuge with their relatives.[18] Murderers and malingerers alike, deemed unsuitable to remain overseas, were photographed and a copy sent back to the Emigration Agents in India to prevent their remigration, along with a covering letter describing those embarked on the return ships. Figure 1 is a sample letter addressed by H.N.D. Beyts, the Protector of Immigrants, to the Emigration Agent at Madras on 21st February 1879. The photographs of four men were affixed to it and their names and immigration numbers recorded in the margin. Returning vagrants were unlikely to have savings, and as many were simply men too ill to work, their pitiful condition was remarked upon by the local press – the sight of debilitated, dying returnees dumped on the

quayside was naturally unwelcome. Some were in a state verging on nudity as they had been obliged to sell their clothes.[19] Impoverished individuals without the means to return to their natal villages could be targeted by recruiters at the ports of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay and inveigled into re-indenturing, despite the efforts of the Emigration Agents to prevent this.

Statistics for such criminalised remigrants are not available but there is archival evidence of individual cases of vagrants returning to the same colony, where their offending history would have been more easily discoverable. The case of one such man, Dookee, was discussed in a letter between the Protector of Immigrants and the Inspector General of Police in Mauritius on 10th March 1871. The man concerned testified that having been deported from the island to Calcutta, he had managed to get to his village, 'but having no friends he returned to the depot where he remained 22 days and was again put on board ship and sent to Mauritius.' Dookee's status as an 'incorrigible vagrant' was only discovered because having been engaged to a plantation in the southern district of Savanne, he again absconded and was picked up by the police and sent to the vagrant depot where he was recognised. [20] The short-sightedness of the vagrancy policy, and its inhumanity, eventually led to the institution of regulations whereby the colonial government provided funds for deportees to return to their respective villages. However, as in Dookee's case, economic destitution was likely to lead to social alienation, perpetuating the cycle of remigration.


Immigration Office
21st February 1870

To
The Emigration Agent
Madras.

No 16

Sir,

I have the honor to inform you that I have this day embarked on board the "Alabama" four incorrigible vagabonds named in margin.

2.- I should feel obliged by your taking the necessary steps to prevent their returning to this Colony.

3.- Their tickets bearing their photographs are herewith forwarded.

I have &c.
(sgd) H. N. D. Beyts.
Protector of Immigrants

4 Incorrigible Vagabonds deported
1.- Mamodamy No 184926
2.- Ramow No 2754
3.- Carabadrow No 184905
4.- Cottah No 207370

1. 2. 3. 4.

Figure 1: Sample of a letter depicting 'incorrigible vagabonds' deported from Mauritius[21]

A second category of criminalised remigrants were transportees. Indians convicted of crimes overseas might be sentenced to transportation, rather than being deported to India at the end of their sentence. For example, in 1839 Sittoo Pende, an Indian labourer in Mauritius, was sentenced to seven years transportation for the crime of arson.[22] The plight of Belasee, sent

back to India from Mauritius in March 1846, is shocking. Having lost the use of one of her arms as a result of a violent attack by her husband – who was transported to Australia for the attempted murder – she had no means of support, and was therefore doubly victimised.[23] The archival records of convict transportees from the sugar colonies do not generally give the destination, although from historical sources we know that in the 1830s and 1840s, criminals sentenced to transportation from Mauritius went to Australia.[24] The writing of the life histories of these convict remigrants was begun in the pioneering work of Clare Anderson but deserves further exploration.[25]

Very often indentured migrants would forego the opportunity to return home in exchange for the opportunity to acquire land, either free (as in the early years of migration to Trinidad), or at a much reduced rate. The increasingly visible presence of overseas Indians over the course of the nineteenth century produced political fears of alien populations in some countries which resulted in repatriation schemes and restrictive immigration policies. The correspondence of the Bassa brothers illustrates the effect of such problems on one Muslim remigrant family. Ally Mamode Bassa arrived in Mauritius as a passenger from Natal at the turn of the nineteenth century. Five years later, following the death of his father, he received a letter from his older brother in Natal:

To Brother Ally Mamode Bassa
Mauritius

Cassim Amod Bassa
Merchant and Importer
Commercial Road
Dear Brother,
I have received letter from Hajee Ajum Goolam Hossen of Mauritius saying that your brother was here and said if I want to go to India. I intend to go to Natal. Let me know your decision so as to deposit the money. Now I wrote him in answer that kindly hand Rs 75 to my brother. He could do what he could therefore kindly go and get it.
But brother you come here without fears but better for you to go to India and then you can come here and we will do some arrangement to land you and also suppose you come here and if the Immigration Officer refused to land them what you could do you can come to Mauritius but the steamer will proceed to England. Well you don't want to go to England therefore kindly take my advice and proceed to India and thereafter I will write you what to do and what to say and how to come.
Yours faithfully,
Cassim A Bassa [26]

Despite the reservations of Cassim, Amode wished to return to Natal but feared that he would not get permission to land, and therefore requested the authorities in Mauritius to ascertain what conditions he would be required to fulfil in order to be readmitted to that country.[27] He had two petitions drafted in French to this effect. The Protector in reply informed him of the conditions under which ‘asiatics and others (termed undesirable)’ could disembark at Natal:

(a) If proceeding to Natal to trade or in search of work, they must justify of their means of subsistence (I believe £ 20).

(b) If proceeding there to join a friend or relative, the latter must vouch for the fact, either personally or by a document to be produced by the person - He need only get an acknowledgement from his brother that he is to reside at his place. This is sufficient to ensure his being booked by one of the castle boats. [28]

The Protector was sympathetic enough to request that a letter be drafted to Cassim Amod Bassa on the boy's behalf asking him to write and say that Ally Mamode Bassa was his brother and that he was willing to receive and take care of him. Cassim, the elder brother, was described as a merchant importer residing in Durban and a letter asking him to send the required documentation to enable him to send for his minor brother was forwarded. Evidently no reply was received, for the boy, Ally, twice more visited the Immigration Department in Mauritius for news. Six months later, in mid-1906, the immigration office closed the file, so we do not know if the young Ally was ever able to take over the family shop in Natal. The correspondence is nevertheless useful for what it reveals of the increasingly restrictive measures implemented to forestall the settlement of Indians in certain territories. Classing Indian migrants as undesirables was a further means of criminalizing them, forcing repatriation on some, and decreasing mobility for others.

Familial Remigrants

Within a very few years of the commencement of Indian indentured migration to Mauritius, indeed, before slaves had even been freed from apprenticeship, time-expired labourers began to remigrate with their families. In 1839, for example, Lucas & Lesieur, a firm of architects in Port Louis, the capital of Mauritius, reported among their employees, one man who had spent six years in Réunion, returned to India, then re-engaged for Mauritius accompanied by his wife.[29]

The Protectors' Reports on individual ships arriving in the late 1840s, briefly mentioned above as elucidating cases of robbery committed against returnees in India, are also a valuable source of information about remigrants who chose to return to their overseas employments, bringing with them wives, family members and co-villagers. Six of those on board the 'Futtay Salam' in April 1849 were listed as remigrants who had been back in India for periods of time varying between six months and two years, and had carried away savings of between 30 and 140 Rupees. Two had married in India and returned with their wives. [30]

A statistical analysis of available Protector's Reports (of which only a small number have been conserved in the archives) for the year 1849 is given in Table 1.

Table 1

Date of Arrival	Nos of Remigrants	
	Male	Female
March 12th	10	

March 31st	17	
April 11th	6	
April 17th	10	
April 27th	10	2
June 6th	13	
June 15th	9	
July 11th	12	
July 29th	20	
July 30th	4	
Aug 30th	8	
Sept 2nd		11
Sept 3rd	6	
Sept 24th	11	
Oct 6th	23	1
Oct 8th	6	
Oct 9th	7	
Oct 16th	15	
Oct 18th	9	
Nov 22nd	25	10
Nov 26th	19	
Dec 28th	12	

Source: Protector's Reports, CO 167 files, 1849.

Onward migration from Burma to Malaya was officially encouraged when the rubber economy was booming. The resulting problems of family regroupment are noted in official correspondence, such as in the case of Sittu Reddiyar (referred to earlier), who migrated in 1937 from Burma to Malaya to work as a rubber tapper on the Sabrang Estate in Teluk Anson in Hilir Perak District.[31] He had previously migrated to Madras from Lalapettai village, North Arcot, and then from Madras to Burma, accompanied by his family and married cousin Mannankatti Ramasami and wife Sinnammal. There he worked in a rice godown owned by a government clerk, Mohideen Bahadur, in Mayetwa, where things did not go well.

> Sir, I beg to say that our wages were not paid during the period of our employ, but we used to get our rations (*blanja*) rice and provisions. When we demanded for our wages that Kangany Kanniyappa Meistry told us that he had an account in a book and would settle the wages due to us later. After having worked for 2 1/2 years the said Kangany debited against us a sum of about Rs. 80/- and pressed us to work for a further period till we settle the amount of Rs. 80.

Having been cheated of his wages, Sittu left his wife and two young sons behind and moved to Malaya on the Malayan government's assisted migration scheme. Teluk Anson was a thriving town at the heart of a huge agricultural district and Sittu found the work there agreeable. When he then received a letter from his wife in Burma saying that 'she is suffering very much with the two children and starving, and wishes to come to Malaya', he petitioned the government to

assist them in joining him, offering to pay their passage money. The Deputy Commissioner Pyapon agreed to help. At the same time, Sittu sought government assistance in cancelling his iniquitous debts to Kanniappa Maistrys – the outcome of which is unknown.[32]

The statement of Amirtham shows the degree of mobility which some former indentured worker families experienced, in an effort to reunite their family. Her deposition, made on 4th September 1895, in Natal, reveals that she had travelled extensively between Bourbon, Mauritius, India and South Africa, in search of her husband:

> I am the wife of Seeniwasa Padayachi … I was married to my husband at Bourbon about 17 years ago. I lived with him for 10 ½ years in Bourbon. I had five children by him ... About 7 years ago my husband left me at 'Bourbon' taking with him 2 boys … I went to India and searched for them at Pondichery and other places but could not find them. Then I started for Mauritius, stayed there 15 days and searched for them, but could not find them. I then went to Bourbon and stayed there for a year, went back to India, stayed there for 7 months, returned again to Bourbon and remained there 3 years, when I received a letter from my eldest son Sawapathy giving me the full particulars of my husband and himself. At once I started for Madras and then made enquiries at the Indian Emigration Office there. They informed me that my husband emigrated for Natal with a woman named Valliammal as his wife. … I then started for Natal with my youngest son Gurusamy and arrived here in December 1894 … I found my son Sondram there. He told me that my husband was in Swaziland.[33]

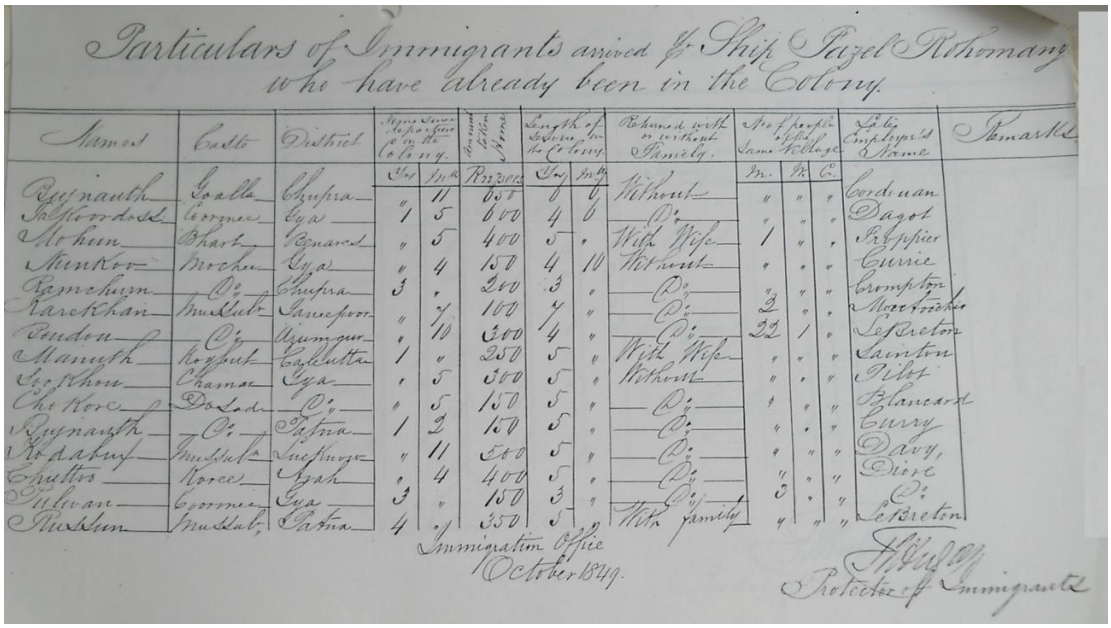
Amirtham eventually caught up with her husband in Natal, but he refused to leave his new wife and return to live with her. It is not known where she eventually ended her travels. Her story is nevertheless a striking testimony to the impetus for family regroupment as a factor in subaltern Indian remigration in the Indian Ocean region.

Sirdari-Contractor Remigrants

A significant number of remigrants were effectively 'returnee recruiters', bringing indentured workers to their employers. Their usual reward was elevation to a sirdarship (an overseer or foreman role) as well as a payment per head for each recruit brought. A similar role was played by the *maistry* or *kangani* who recruited South Indians to work in Sri Lanka, Burma, or Malaya. An example of this is found in Mauritius in the Protector's report on the *Futtay Salam* from Calcutta, which arrived at Port Louis on 11 April 1849. This specified that on board were 110 men, 28 women, and 26 children, described as 'hill coolies'. 'These people', he noted approvingly, 'were brought from their village by two men sent from this to recruit 4 months ago. This system of recruiting deserves every encouragement.' [34]

Of particular interest, in the ship reports, are the occasional tables compiled giving details of individual remigrants and persons they brought with them. In many cases, remigrants appear

to have combined the collection of family members with the recruitment of unrelated co-villagers. On the *Fazel Rohomany* for instance, Mohun of Benares, is described as having spent five months in India, after going back with 400 rupees in savings, and of returning with his wife and a man from his village. Boudou, a Muslim from Azimghur, had spent 10 months in India and brought with him 22 men and one woman of his village. Pulwan, of 'Coormee' (Kurmi) caste from Gya returned to Mauritius with three men from his village [Figure 2].[35]



Particulars of Immigrants arrived by Ship Fazel Rohomany who have already been in the Colony.

Names	Caste	District	Years Since last left the Colony	Months	Amount of Money	Length of Stay in the Colony	Months	Returned with or without Family	No. of persons of the same Village			Name of Employer	Remarks
			Yrs	Mths	Rupees	Yrs	Mths		Mn	Wn	Ch		
Ruginauth	Goalla	Chupra	"	11	650	4	6	Without	"	"	"	Cordeuan	
Salfoordeen	Coormee	Gya	"	1	600	4	6	Do	"	"	"	Dagot	
Mohun	Khart	Benares	"	5	400	5	"	With Wife	1	"	"	Le Poitier	
Munkoo	Mochee	Gya	"	4	150	4	10	Without	"	"	"	Currie	
Ramchuyn	Do	Chupra	3	"	200	3	"	Do	"	"	"	Crompton	
Karokhan	Mussulman	Saneapoor	"	7	160	4	"	Do	2	"	"	Mootoochee	
Boudou	Do	Azumgur	"	10	300	4	"	Do	22	1	"	Le Breton	
Mainuth	Koppit	Calcutta	1	"	250	5	"	With Wife	"	"	"	Samton	
Sookhoo	Chamar	Gya	"	5	300	5	"	Without	"	"	"	Pilot	
Cheeroo	Do	Do	"	5	150	5	"	Do	"	"	"	Blancard	
Ruginauth	Do	Patna	1	2	150	5	"	Do	"	"	"	Curry	
Kodabux	Mussulman	Lucknow	"	11	500	5	"	Do	"	"	"	Davy, Dore	
Sultan	Koree	Gyah	"	4	400	5	"	Do	"	"	"	Do	
Pulwan	Coormee	Gya	3	"	150	3	"	Do	3	"	"	Le Breton	
Nuddun	Mussulman	Patna	4	"	350	5	"	With family	4	"	"		

Immigration Office
October 1849.

Protector of Immigrants

Figure 2: Protector's Report on 'Fazel Rohomany'

Within Asia, contractor-directed migration was common from the outset and identified by various regional terms.[36] Akbar Shah was a successful Pathan contractor, born at Qui in the District of Peshawar, who at the age of 27 left to work in British India. He began by recruiting 200 Afridis and Pathans to undertake contract work on the Assam-Bengal railway in Assam. He then moved with a party of men to Rangoon (Yangon) in Burma (Myanmar), where they worked for the Public Works Department, the Railways, and finally in quarries providing stone for the reconstruction of the Rangoon docks. Within three years he had muscled out his two rivals and became the sole contractor, with 700-800 Indian labourers in his pay. British officials described him as the largest civilian contractor in South Asia. From Rangoon, his brother Ajab Gool took a party of 200 Pathans to Sri Lanka, to undertake railway extension work in Ratnapura, and subsequently cutting and tunnelling work for the railway at Meeragam. Unfortunately, in 1915 Akbar Shah came to official notice, being suspected of having played a part in inciting a Muslim regiment in Singapore to mutiny. Given the involvement of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, there were widespread fears of Muslim plotting to undermine British rule. Therefore, when Akbar Shah embarked for Colombo in June of the same year, he was suspected of conspiring to creating further disturbances after meeting at his hotel with an Afridi soldier of the Punjab regiment stationed there. He was immediately arrested and deported back to Rangoon. Soon after this, his brother too was arrested and shipped to India, where he was immediately apprehended and imprisoned at Ramnad by the Madras authorities. Despite multiple petitions and providing letters of support from officials for whom he had previously worked, Akbar Shah could not obtain details of the evidence

against either himself or his brother (all based upon the reports of intelligence officers). Nor could he obtain permission to travel again to Colombo to settle his accounts and assume responsibility for his gang of labourers. Proving reluctant to serve under any other overseer, and being considered a potential source of trouble, the workers themselves were ultimately repatriated at government expense to the North Western Provinces in groups of fifty via Bombay.[37] Such difficulties aside, the presence of contractors is one of the key sources of evidence of rapid remigration strategies among the elite of subalterns.

Multiple Remigrations: the Conundrum of Subaltern 'Careering'

Secondary migrations between colonies and multiple remigrations to a range of destinations could arise from aspirations for betterment or deterioration of conditions in a specific locality or a combination of both. Without individual testimonies it is not always clear whether opportunism or deprivation can be privileged in explanation. However, the indenture system allowed Indians to move over great distances that would otherwise have been unthinkable. Some users of the indenture system do appear to have been aware of and influenced by the varying economic opportunities on offer in the several colonies, that were absent at home. George Grierson interviewed one man in the 1880s who was on his way to Trinidad from India. He had previously worked in Jamaica, where at one time he confided that he had been able to earn as much as three rupees per day. He was now less happy with working conditions there, the result he said of 'too many coolies and too much cultivation', and was therefore intending to try out Trinidad.[38]

What Reshad Durgahee has termed 'subaltern careering', remigration to two or more sugar colonies, during the working life of an indentured labour migrant,[39] is evident from a set of reports compiled in the mid-1860s by the Immigration Department at Mauritius. These enumerated the numbers of persons arriving on each ship from India carrying individuals and families who were returning to the island or had previously worked in plantation labour elsewhere. Aboard the *Eranee,* from Calcutta, for example, were eight men and three women who had previously worked in the tea plantations of Cachar (Assam). The *Moulin*, from Madras, brought 20 persons who had previously worked in Mauritius, three who had been to Reunion, 13 former migrants to Ceylon, two persons who had served in Rangoon, and one person who had each worked in Singapore and Aden respectively.[40] Women, and even children under the age of 16 were found to have previous life experiences in other colonies. Details of remigrants found to be travelling on the ship *Theresa* from Madras are enumerated in Table 1.

Table 2

	Men	Women	Boys
To Mauritius	9	9	1
To Reunion	3	1	2
To Ceylon	18	1	
To Martinique	1		

Source: CO 167/480 Barkly to Cardwell 7 Aug 1865 (213) Encl. Immigration Returns

The list compiled of remigrants arriving on the *Porchester* from Madras provides a further demonstration of entire family groups migrating between one colony and another under the indenture system [Table 2].

Table 3

	Men	Women	Boys	Girls
To Mauritius	7	7	3	1
To Reunion	3	2	2	2
Penang	3			
Singapore	2			
Martinique	1			

Source: CO 167/480 Barkly to Cardwell 7 Aug 1865 (213) Encl. Immigration Returns

Fascinating details on 'subaltern careering' are provided in an analysis by the Protector of Migrants of the remigrants arriving on ships at Mauritius in 1865. A total of 31 ships brought immigrants to the island that year. Of these 728 had previously migrated overseas. Most of the ships came from Calcutta, and the remainder from Madras and Bombay. The remigrants included multiple families, so alongside 534 men were 142 women, 35 boys and 17 girls. The Bombay migrants were the most faithful to their original destination, since nearly all of the migrants were returning to Mauritius having migrated there before. However, more than a third of the remigrants coming from Madras had laboured previously in Reunion or Sri Lanka (Ceylon). Amongst the remigrants from Calcutta, 74% had previously been to Mauritius, while the remainder had worked in locations as diverse as Cachar (a tea district in Assam), Demerara, and Burma. The aggregate of all these remigrants, indicating their previous migrant destinations, is given in Figure 3.

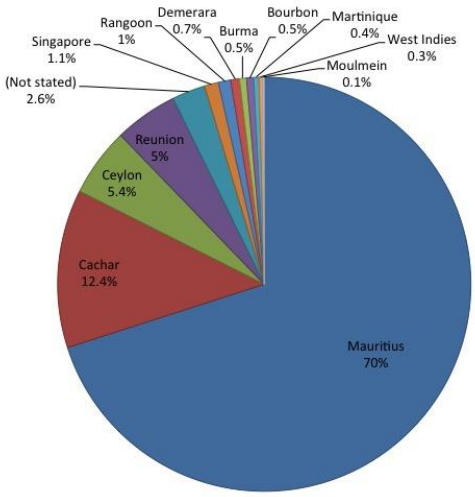


Figure 3: Previous Destinations of those Remigrating to Mauritius in 1865[41]

Many migrants went directly onward from the place of their first indenture contract to new destinations rather than returning to India. In some cases, they were recruited for capitalist enterprises overseas and might well find themselves worse off. Tupper's 'Note on Indian emigration' published in 1879 described, for example, the activities of a man, Jean Secchi, he

considered a 'disreputable Corsican adventurer' and resident of the Antilles, who recruited 42 Indians from Trinidad, St Lucia, Guadeloupe and St Vincent to go to Cuba.[42] In 1875, permission was requested to recruit a group of Indians in Mauritius to work for the Vicomte de Maiva, proprietor of the Attalaya sugar plantation in Brazil on five-year contracts. In subsequent decades the repatriation of Indian deserters from Brazil occasioned a lengthy correspondence involving the Government of India and the British Foreign Office. [43]

Places where slavery was still practised, or which were outside the jurisdiction of the British authorities were likely to be viewed with a greater degree of suspicion. In May 1873, for instance, the Protector of Immigrants reported that he had explained to some Indians wishing to travel for work to Tamatave, Madagascar, 'the danger they run of being enslaved there.'[44] In what may have been a reference to the same incident, in 1874 the British Consul at Madagascar wrote to the Foreign Office about an attempt, the previous year, 'made by Mr E Lebrun of Mauritius to ship from that colony to a place called Sambava on the East coast of Madagascar, about 260 miles north of Tamatave a certain number of time expired Indian labourers to work on a sugar plantation there', The authorities in Mauritius 'very prudently objected' to the arrangement, he added. The Consul noted:

> occasionally time expired Indian immigrants from Mauritius have found their way to Madagascar, but in very small numbers.... Isolated cases of alleged ill treatment by their masters of Anglo Indian immigrants introduced into this island as domestic servants have been brought to my notice and have, invariably, been followed by the discharge and return of such immigrants to Mauritius.[45]

Some remigrants moved from colony to colony simply at the behest of their employers. In 1872, Ally Khan wrote to the Protector of Immigrants about an Indian woman he had recruited from the depot in 1870 to work for him. Subsequently, in May 1871, she had travelled with him to Madagascar and remained there to look after his shop. The woman, Jinian, was described a 24 year old widow of the Kahar caste. Ally Khan, ill with fever, was seeking documents to facilitate her return to Mauritius, where he hoped she would be able to care for him.[46] In 1899, Moonoosamy, also incapacitated by ill health, requested a free passage to India. He had reportedly migrated to Mauritius as a boy aged 12. After spending 10 years on the island, he went to Madagascar. His case was referred to the Poor Law Commissioner, who disposed of funds to assist 'destitute Mauritians' but because Moonoosamy was unable to supply documentary evidence of his initial migration to the island, the Protector of Immigrants informed the Madagascar government that it was their responsibility to ship Moonoosamy home to Madras.[47]

A significant number of Indians migrated from the French-controlled Indian Ocean island of Reunion, to Mauritius. A convention, signed in 1860, permitted British Indian subjects to emigrate to French colonies as indentured labourers, and almost immediately, the prospect of remigration to Mauritius was raised. The Protector of Immigrants responded favourably to

such requests, on the ground that the migrants were 'free to go where they like if they have the means', once their indenture contracts had expired.[48] Passports were issued to would-be remigrants, and licenses given to persons wishing to introduce bands of Indians from Reunion. Major Andrews introduced 76 men, 40 women and one infant girl who were distributed to three sugar estates in Mauritius in June 1867, and two further shiploads arrived in September. However, the migrants were not entirely satisfied. The Protector reported:

> it was after a great deal of hesitation that they accepted the terms proposed to them. They pretended that they had not understood the explanations given to them by the British consul at Reunion and that they had not knowingly agreed to waive their claim to free return passages to India at the expense of the French Government. I immediately addressed Mr Hill and Major Andrews informing them of what had occurred and advised the discontinuance of the recruiting operations of the latter.[49]

The case of Mootoosamy, a carpenter by trade, who travelled with 80 other migrants to Mauritius after the employer with whom he had worked for 15 years in Reunion, was no longer able to retain his services, provides further elucidation concerning this remigration stream. Armed with a 'certificate of good conduct and skill in his trade' he applied to migrate to Mauritius but was told that he would have to sign on as a field labourer and then seek employment as a carpenter once he reached the island. His unhappiness at discovering himself indentured at the low wage of a field labourer can well be imagined.[50] Reverse migration, from Reunion to Mauritius, also took place. The passport of Yellachy Nagapin, a Tamil woman who travelled from Mauritius to Reunion was obtained in 1887 [see Figure 4].


ILE DE LA RÉUNION

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

PASSE-PORT GRATUIT — N° 148

(DÉCRET DU 30 MARS 1887)

Nous, Gouverneur de l'Ile de la Réunion,
certifions que la nlle Yellachy Nagapin
natif de Maurice M. S. 108. 4. 20. Certificat
demeurant à Saint-Denis du Protecteur des Im-
partant pour Maurice le 7 janvier 1892 migrants.
sur le navire
capitaine
a rempli les formalités prescrites par la loi sur les départs.

Prions, en conséquence, les autorités civiles et militaires françaises et étrangères, de le laisser librement passer et de lui donner aide et protection en cas de besoin.

Délivré à Saint-Denis, le six janvier mil huit cent quatre-vingt-dix-huit

Signature du porteur :

Le Commissaire de Police

Le Directeur de l'Intérieur

Pour le Directeur de l'Intérieur
et par délégation
Le Secrétaire général,

SIGNES PARTICULIERS :

Figure 4: The Passport of Yellachy Nagapin[51]

Karin Speedy's work on the remigration of hundreds of Indians from Reunion to New Caledonia is a fascinating case study of this type of economically motivated secondary movement. By 1865, the sugar industry in Reunion was in crisis, 'due to a series of misfortunes, including insect infestations, hurricanes and a drop in world sugar prices …. Wages were not paid, workers lost their jobs and people from all walks of life, not least the thousands of indentured sugar workers brought to Reunion when the sugar industry was booming, faced extreme poverty.' At this time, New Caledonia's governor, saw the benefit in harnessing the skills of the Indian settlers in Reunion. As a result, over the next two decades, hundreds of workers and artisans, 'set sail for the Pacific in the hope of finding better opportunities in New Caledonia.'[52]

Mercantile firms were quick to benefit by steering labour from depressed, overstocked colonies to new markets. In 1881, when the Mauritian sugar economy, like its Reunion neighbour, was in the grip of depression, Blyth Brothers, English merchants long operating on the island, requested to be informed

> whether the govt. of this colony will permit the engagement of coolies whose term of service has expired to work on the plantations at Queensland and in the Fiji Islands. If the govt. has no objection to such engagements being entered into, we shall thank you to inform us what restrictions would be imposed on the emigration and hire of such coolies.

They had been informed 'by our friends in Sydney that the coolies are required to be employed on sugar plantations and factories which they are establishing in Queensland and Fiji and they would require men who have been accustomed to work in the cane fields and others who have held situations in the mills.' [53]

Dewan Sita Ram's case is illustrative of the risks always inherent in 'subaltern careering'. In 1905 he petitioned the Protector of Immigrants at Mauritius for assistance to settle his debts and a free passage for himself and his wife to India. An investigation into his case revealed that he had left India to take a job on the Uganda Railway and had been hoping to find similar work in Mauritius, where a railway network had also been planned and constructed. By the time of his arrival, however, along with seven other labourers, the work was completed. Unable to find alternative employment Sita Ram was described as 'sick and without means and suffering from privation and want' by the time his case was looked into. The Protector advised as follows:

> If he remains here he will spend most of his time in hospital and be a source of expense to the Colony as he and his wife are unfit to work as agricultural labourers. The poor man has been most unfortunate in his attempt to find employment here, but out of the 7 men he brought with him 6 are agricultural labourers and will prove useful to the colony in the cultivation of canes and

manufacture of sugar. The 7th man is a cook and can find employment here. Funds are available for the return passages.

This was acceded to by the colonial authorities and the Protector was instructed to arrange their passages and supply Sita Ram and his wife with food until their departure.[54] Subaltern Indian migrants were thus willing to take extraordinary risks to find new opportunities for themselves and their families; these risks sometimes failed to pay off and the 'mobility' of migrants could be as much a sign of fragility and vulnerability as it was of entrepreneurship and courage.

The biggest collapse of employment of all came with the great depression in 1930, which saw the repatriation of vast numbers of Indian migrants around the Indian Ocean, either at their own expense or that of colonial governments.[55] When they could no longer be found alternative employment (or allotments to cultivate) the Malayan government repatriated nearly 250,000 workers, along with their *kangani* recruiters, who had been rendered redundant by serial failures in the rubber industry.[56] When the government of India later allowed labour migration to resume in 1934, 'a rush of emigrants' was reported in the newspapers. So great was the demand that in July 1934 two extra boats, the S.S Erinpura and S.S Talma, were pressed into service to bring emigrants and deck passengers from Madras and Negaptam, besides those conveyed by the regular fortnightly sailings made by the S.S. Rohna and S.S. Rajula. In January 1935 three more boats were added to the route.[57] As many as 30% of the assisted migrants amongst them bore letters issued by plantation owners (*thitti-surats* or *puthal-surats*). These showed they were returning to plantations where they or their friends and relatives had previously worked, thus pointing to the enduring appeal and necessity for Indians of employment overseas.[58]

Remigrating Out of Indenture

There is evidence of ex-indentured migrants remigrating with their savings and shifting from labouring to engage in commercial activities. Significant numbers of Indians remigrated from Mauritius to South Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century. These were not, for the most part, labourers, but many were ex-indentured Indians hoping to work in service or white-collar sectors. By 1884, the Inspector of Indian schools in Natal observed that most of the Indian teachers available were from Mauritius, denigrating their skills, nevertheless as 'too often of a slight and superficial kind'.[59]

Large-scale recruitment of Indian workers was always accompanied or closely followed by migration of service providers. As time-expired labourers began to remigrate, paying their own fares, the distinction between indentured and passenger Indians became increasingly blurred. In 1868, for example, the ship *Fathe Shah Allum* arrived from Calcutta with 310 immigrants on board, 'accompanied by 23 men and 6 women who had themselves paid for their passages and had embarked without entering into contracts of service. Nearly all of these had been in Mauritius before.'[60] In 1883, a total of 639 Indians withdrew their savings from banks in Mauritius prior to leaving the island. The majority were taking their capital back to India, but two of this number proceeded to Natal, two left for Reunion and two went to China[61].

A not inconsiderable number of the children of indentured migrants undertook remigration in search of job opportunities. In 1899, the Protector in Mauritius received an urgent request from the parents of Dersady who had travelled to Zanzibar and then East Africa in search of work. They were worried, not knowing whether he were alive or dead [62]. Within a few months, the Consul at Mombasa responded with the news that Dersady, described as a dhoby or washerman was 'in the employ of the Chief Engineer of the Uganda Railway, Mr G Whitehouse.'[63] Dersady forwarded a letter written in Tamil for his parents with the Consul's communication. The letter is an illuminating example of a subaltern Indian migrant's perspective on job opportunities and chances to improve his lot:

> I am no more in Zanzibar. I am at present in Mombassa. The reason is that there is now work there. They are now introducing train travel from a village called Kilindini up to Uganda. There, there is a lot of work. You know there I earn for one day Rs 10. I am settled at English Point and Kilindini. There is 2 miles between English Point and Kilindini. I have to travel to that place. I am going to open a workshop there on October 1st. So I have sent a fellow from Calcutta named Jothas to Zanzibar to take two or three persons to work here. Many chiefs (white men) are coming in large numbers in Kilindini and Mombassa. I feel like leaving Jothas in English Point and moving to Kilindini. It's two months since I came here. Here only two houses (families) are friends. Including me it would make three in all. They work for 8 rupees a day. I am earning Rs 10 per head and 10.5 rupees for the ship. A sack of rice costs Rs 18. For the time being I am working for 8 chiefs. It's just to let you know this news. Hereafter I shall write letters every month. You also keep sending me letters. I worship father and mother. I wish that blessings of the lord be on us and all elders. I also wish the best to all young ones.

Dersady ended his letter by extending a welcome to any of his relatives who might wish to join him with the promise of finding them work: 'In case there is a wish to come to Mombassa, each one can pay the ship travel fees. If once they are here I can find them a job. If not they may work for themselves.'[64]

Peria Moodally, born to Indian immigrant parents in Mauritius, was one of many individuals of the first and second generation indentured migrants to settle in South Africa. We know something about Peria's life because of the letter he wrote to the Protector of Immigrants at Mauritius to secure the wellbeing of his elderly mother, who, he said had come to the island 'as indenture'.

> Sir,
> I beg most respectfully to inform you that I'm a Indo-Mauritian who left Mauritius in the year of 1904.

> I have left my mother at Mauritius. She has no one to look after her. The Education Department of Mauritius must give me certain amount i.e a share in the result of the Examination of Côte D'Or S.P.G Aided and Rose Hill Mahomedan Aided Schools. I wrote to the Education Dept. no answer received, then my mother wrote several times to the Director of Public Instruction unfortunately she received no answer after having sent a Power of Attorney.
> As you are the protector of Indians, and my mother came to Mauritius as indenture, I hope your honour will have no objection to take this matter into your consideration and to make her get the amount which I'm entitle.
> In order to get the No. of my mother, can find it easily in her free paper. If the Education Dept. does not consider that she is my mother. I can ask the Dept. to look at the Registration of Birth's Room that I have born in Mauritius in the year of 1872. On the 7th day of January where can find her name too with number.
> Praying to be excused for the intrusion upon your precious and valuable time.
> I remain Sir,
> Your obedient servant
> Peria Moodally
> My mother's address:
> Ammanee, c/o Saminaden Sirdar
> Stanley Estate, Rose Hill.
> My mother holds a receipt for the power of attorney which was sent to the Education Dept.[65]

Later that year, Peria was informed that his Mother had been reimbursed the sum requested.[66] The information about Dersady and Peria is invaluable because of the rarity of such letters in colonial archives. Letters from migrants were forwarded postage-free by the Protectors of Immigrants in order to provide their families with information about life overseas (and hopefully encourage others to emigrate). They survived in the 'Dead Letter Office' of the post office in various colonies when for one reason or another they failed to reach their destination. As more such correspondence is unearthed and analysed, it is hoped that our understanding of remigration activities of subaltern Indians in the colonial era will be further nuanced and enhanced.

This article has endeavoured to take the remigration debate further through a reassessment of the existing literature and the regroupment of archival and anecdotal evidence. The trajectories of the subaltern Indian migrant are complex and nuanced as this study has endeavoured to show through the presentation of a variety of archival sources and the compilation of statistical evidence. We propose herein a new system of classification according to categories of distress, criminalization, familial and contractor-inspired remigration, and offer further analysis of the conundrum of 'subaltern careering' and the limitations of subaltern mobility, alongside some case studies of successful examples of remigrants who made the transition from labour to entrepreneurship. Our data is drawn largely from archives of former British sugar colonies of

the Indian Ocean, but it is potentially generalisable to migrant destinations further afield (including the Caribbean). In proposing these categories we seek to open a space for divergent narratives of migrant agency and a recognition of the complexity involved in migrant decision making. By distinguishing agency from the vexed concept of freedom, even migrants who accept the status quo can be expressing a desire and exercising a choice, just as entrepreneurship and courage can arise from circumstances of fragility and vulnerability. Although these categories may be distinguishable at one moment, it must be remembered that migrants could transition several times in a lifetime from one to another. This makes it difficult to generalise about the experience of the various forms of indentured, post indenture, and contracted labour to be found in the Indian Ocean region in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The resulting diversity of experiences and forms of remigration that results suggests that colonial norms of labour regulation were never quite as hegemonic and all-encompassing as they pretended to be. It remains clear that it is only by exploring the multiple narratives of Indian migrant experiences that we can begin to make sense of the totality of Indian labour history.

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[31] Teluk Anson was named after a British Officer and last Lieutenant-Governor of Penang, Major-General Sir Archibald Edward Harbord Anson who drew the plan of the modern township in 1882. Known for its 'leaning clock tower' (often compared to the Leaning Tower of Pisa), the name was changed in 1982 to Teluk Intan by the Sultan of Perak, in recognition of its earlier origins as the home of the Perak court from 1528 until Kuala Kangsar become the royal town in 1877. See Khoo Kay Kim, 'Teluk Anson: 1882-1941: Port, Agriculture and Erosion', *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 68, No. 2 (269) (1995), pp. 33-52

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[53] MA PL 44 Blyth Bros & Co. to Protector of Immigrants 28 July 1881 Their application was put on hold until the legislation set up to regulate indentured labour, then being revised, had been passed.

[54] MA PL 13 Immigration Office Note, 30 Jan 1905; Colonial Secretary to Protector of Immigrants, 9 Feb 1905.

[55] In Malaya, the costs of repatriation and assisted migration were borne by the Indian Immigration Fund (established in 1907), which was funded by levies upon the employers. The fund also established an Old Folks Home in Circular Road, Kuala Lumpur in 1913 for the aged and infirm South Indians who did not want to return to India. See Pushpavalli A Rengasamey and Sivachandralingam Sundara Raja. 2020. 'A critique on the South Indian labour fund and the Malaysian Indian plantation workers'. *KEMANUSIAAN the Asian Journal of Humanities* 27(1): 115–133.

[56] Malaysia National Archives (MalNA), 290. 1957/0518976 KELANTAN 311/1933 Share of cost of repatriation 1933 of decrepit and unemployed Indians, Controller of Labour, Malaya. 28th March 1933.

[57] MalNA. 2014/0012390 Statistics of Indian Labourers emigrating to and returning from Malaya and Daily price of Rubber. Extract from notes on File no 195/34 – L. & O. Regarding continuance of assisted emigration to Malaya. *Times of Malaya*, 105.34.

[58] K.S. Sandhu, *Indians in Malaya: immigration and settlement, 1786-1957* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 106-107.

[59] J.B. Brain, *Christian Indians in Natal, 1860-1911 An Historical and Statistical Study*, (Cape Town, Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 205.

[60] NA CO 167/510 despatch of Governor Barkly, 14 Sept 1868 (251) Encl Immigration Returns.

[61] MA B2 Administration Report 1883 Report of the Government Savings Bank, Annexure 4.

[62] MA PA 206 Immigration Office note 12 Oct 1899.

[63] Ibid., H M Acting Consul, to Protector, 30 Nov 1899

[64] MA PA 206 Letter from Dersady to his family; translated from the Tamil by Mr Soornum, Tamil language teacher at Mahatma Gandhi Institute, Mauritius.

[65] MA PL 23 Periam Oodally to Protector 19 Aug. 1907.

[66] MA PL 23 Protector to Peria 15 Nov 1907.